



San Francisco passes ban on police and city use of public facial biometrics

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San Francisco's Board of Supervisors approved a ban on public biometric facial recognition use by police and other city departments by an eight to one vote, with two supervisors who [CNN](#) reports supported the ordinance not present for the vote.

The [new rule](#) goes into effect in a month, and bans all 53 city departments, including [transit authorities](#), from using a range of surveillance technologies, including automated license plate readers. It does make exceptions for San Francisco International Airport and the Port of San Francisco. It also does not prevent businesses or individuals from using facial recognition, or the police from using footage from private cameras.

"This is really about saying: 'We can have security without being a security state. We can have good policing without being a police state.' And part of that is building trust with the community based on good community information, not on Big Brother technology," said Supervisor Aaron Peskin, who proposed the ordinance.

Some amendments had been made to the ordinance based on [police suggestions](#), but the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation panned the decision. The think tank's Vice President Daniel Castro says facial recognition would make it cheaper and faster for police to find suspects and missing people, and comparisons to Chinese state surveillance are poorly founded, according to [Reuters](#).

"In reality, San Francisco is more at risk of becoming Cuba than China—a ban on facial recognition will make it frozen in time with outdated technology," Castro says.

Peskin said on [Twitter](#) that a grassroots coalition was behind the change, made up of groups including Color of Change and the American Civil Liberties Union of Northern California.

"With this vote, San Francisco has declared that face surveillance technology is incompatible with a healthy democracy and that residents deserve a voice in decisions about high-tech surveillance," said ACLU of Northern California technology and civil liberties attorney Matt Cagle in a statement. "We applaud the city for listening to the community, and leading the way forward with this crucial legislation."

In a [blog post](#) written on the subject prior to the vote, Cato Institute Director, Project on Emerging Technologies Matthew Feeney calls for a balanced position, and says that putting effective policies in place may allow police to leverage the technology without risking civil liberties. Such policies would likely include a prohibition on real-time capability, databases restricted to only those individuals who are wanted for violent crimes. Feeney also suggests open

source and open data requirements, public hearing requirements, and a confidence threshold for deployments of 95 percent across all demographics.

Boston-area city Somerville's City Council is also considering a ban against facial recognition use in police investigations and municipal surveillance systems, the Boston Globe reports. A bill recently introduced already has the backing of nine out of 11 councillors, as well as the mayor.

The ACLU says Somerville is the first East Coast city to consider a ban, but several other cities in the Bay Area have either put rules in place or may do so soon.

Facial recognition could be useful for terrorism and other serious emergencies, according to the Somerville proposal's lead sponsor, Councillor Ben Ewen-Campen.

"I think large numbers of the public may eventually be convinced that there is a useful need for this kind of thing," says Ewen-Campen. "But to use cases like that as the thin edge of a wedge to allow the government to just, in real time, surveil every person in every public space in our community, I think that's where the real danger is."